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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000077

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SUBJECT: UNHCR SYRIA RAMPING UP FOR MORE ASSISTANCE TO  
DISPLACED IRAQIS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: UNHCR Damascus is planning a dramatic increase in services to the at least 800,000 Iraqis in Syria this year, with an appeal for a more than 20-fold budget increase and a scheduled visit to Damascus next month of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, according to the UNHCR Representative here. UNHCR will focus on improving education and health services to Iraqis in Syria, both at SARG schools and clinics and through organizations like the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, the representative said. Officials at UNHCR and UNRWA also continue to grapple with the issue of Iraqi Palestinians. UNHCR will face two challenges while seeking to increase its services to Iraqis. First, it will continue to have difficulty determining exactly how many Iraqis actually live in Syria and under what conditions. Second, UNHCR will likely struggle to find capable partners, given the scarcity of international NGOs here and the limited capacity of local groups. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres is scheduled to visit Damascus in early February as part of UNHCR efforts to boost assistance to displaced Iraqis here, according to local UNHCR Representative Laurens Jolles. The local UNHCR office is ramping up its operations, which last year included about USD 700,000 in assistance for Iraqis but is slated to rise to as much as USD 15 million in 2007, depending on the funding of UNHCR's USD 60 million appeal for Iraq operations regionally, Jolles said. UNHCR-Damascus has already received a commitment of USD 4.8 million, Jolles said. Depending on response to the appeal, a second tranche would be 6.3 million, with the remainder coming with the third tranche, Jolles said.

¶3. (C) UNHCR will focus on improving education and health services to Iraqis in Syria, including at SARG schools and clinics, the representative said. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent will receive a large portion of the funds for health clinics in areas heavily populated by Iraqis, Jolles said. Funding will also go toward increased UNHCR staffing, additional community services, and possibly the establishment of a small field office near El Hol camp in northeastern Syria, which houses about 300 Iraqi Palestinians admitted in 2005 and mid-2006.

¶4. (C) UNHCR would also like to undertake a second socio-economic survey of Iraqis in Syria, now estimated to be at least 800,000 persons, Jolles said. The first study, which was conducted with UNICEF and the World Food Program in late 2005, estimated the population of Iraqis in Syria at

450,000, based on limited SARG immigration data and UN household surveys from Damascus neighborhoods heavily populated by Iraqis. The SARG, however, remains unwilling so far to provide access to current entry and exit data, Jolles said. (Comment: Generally, the SARG seeks to control data that could provide on internal government operations. Given the politicized nature of the Syria-Iraq border, the SARG probably considers this data particularly sensitive. End Comment.)

¶5. (C) Additionally, UNHCR is establishing new resettlement criteria, with the aim of boosting the number of Iraqis referred for resettlement in third countries from a handful last year to at least 4,000 persons in 2007, Jolles said. More broadly, UNHCR wants to dramatically increase the number of Iraqis registered with its office and has hired at least 10 new clerks and expanded hours of service, Jolles said. (Comment: Only an estimated 40,000 Iraqis have registered with UNHCR Damascus since the start of the current conflict in Iraq, probably because UNHCR assistance has largely been limited to a "Protection Letter" that merely identifies the holder and requests authorities' assistance. End Comment.)

¶6. (C) Increased funding and meetings with SARG officials at the ministries of Education, Health and Foreign Affairs have put an end to rumors of SARG plans to limit the entry of an estimated 2,000 Iraqis arriving daily in Syria, Jolles said. (Note: Like other Arabs, Iraqis can enter the country without a visa for three months and then receive a one-time extension for three months. After that, Iraqis must leave and reenter Syria. End Note.)

¶7. (C) UNHCR continues to push quietly for an agreement with the SARG that Iraqis would not be required to leave Syria to

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get an extension of their stay, Jolles said. Additionally, UNHCR would like an agreement permitting Iraqis to work in certain jobs not currently being filled by the Syrian work force such as construction, Jolles said. As noted in the March 2006 survey, UN agencies are concerned that Iraqis in Syria are running out of their savings, leading to an increase in child labor and prostitution, Jolles said. (Comment: Based on Post's observations, although Iraqis do not have the legal right to work in Syria, authorities often turn a blind eye to their money-making activities. End Comment.)

¶8. (C) Officials at UNHCR and UNRWA also continue to grapple with the issue of Iraqi Palestinians, said Jolles, who is exploring resettlement options regionally and beyond. So far, the SARG has resisted such proposals, fearing it would weaken Palestinians' right to return to the Occupied Territories as part of a comprehensive peace deal, Jolles said. About 300 Iraqi Palestinians have been living since late 2005 and mid-2006 in UNHCR's El Hol refugee camp in Syria's northeast. Another 350 Iraqi Palestinians have been living for months in tents between a two-lane highway and a wall in the no-man's-land at the Tanef-Walid crossing between Syria and Iraq, UNRWA officials said. The Iraqi Palestinians exited Iraq but have not been allowed to enter Syria for fear that such a move would encourage others to come. Indeed, an additional, 120 Iraqi Palestinians are camped out on the Iraq side of the Tanef-Walid crossing in hopes they will be granted access to Syria. UNRWA officials suspect that up to 7,000 other Iraqi Palestinians may have entered the country using fake Iraqi documents that do not indicate their Palestinian background, although only 241 Iraqi Palestinian children have entered UNRWA schools this year, officials said.

¶9. (C) Comment: Since the start of the Iraq conflict, Syria has permitted Iraqis access to health and educational services, but domestic concerns are likely to reduce what the SARG can offer. The increased UNHCR funding for Iraqis in Syria therefore comes as welcome news, especially given troubling reports that the majority of Iraqi children here

are not in school and that child labor and organized prostitution are on the rise. UNHCR will face two challenges, however, while seeking to increase its services to Iraqis. First, it will continue to have difficulty determining exactly how many Iraqis actually live in Syria and under what conditions. Second, UNHCR will likely struggle to find capable partners, given the scarcity of international NGOs here and the limited capacity of local groups.

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